

of work kept us from tearing each other's heads off, as did the desperation which was always lurking below the surface. We were a long way from home. We were all we had.

Mikey's recent foray into Tantric Buddhism, complete with relentlessly inappropriate utterances, had vanished now the Bugs were living up to our expectations. They had become the sole focus of his attention.

He got so bad that one day I woke to find him leaning over me. As soon as I opened my eyes he started talking at me, drowning me in details about their eugenics programme.

I shoved him away and went for a walk. With full armour and scorch fields I left an incendiary path through the sparse shrub. We were under the strongest directive to remain undetected but there were no Bugs this far out so who gave a shit? The small intense sun hung high over the flat ground, making it look even flatter. The mudball was a quiet place with no really large bodies of water to give it interesting weather.

All worlds smell different though no human has ever given it a try directly, the effects of airborne alien microorganisms being too complicated to contemplate even for the AIs. But we could get the AIs to simulate it from their analyses of atmospheric gases and biomass emissions. This planet had an acrid herby bitterness which would have taken a lot of getting used to. Mikey and I had never bothered. We'd gotten used to our own emissions.

After the Bugs had reached the Glyphics stage we'd got the Orbiter to fire off a capsule, one of only three we had for communications with home. The pea-sized memory, safely enclosed in several hundred tonnes of engine, would take almost half a year to accelerate up to half light-speed. At that point it would have enough energy for the Push. An instant later the memory would be back in the Solar System, broadcasting all our findings before it continued off into deep space.

I knew only too well that the "instant" took a subjective eternity. It was as though you still had your umbilicus which you were sucked through until it inverted and you were shat out the other side. When you got to the mid-point, just before the inversion, you experienced a bleakness and an emptiness that cut through the heaviest narcotic. Nobody knew why. I was comforted by the thought that the next Push would be my last.

The limits of interstellar communication meant that it would take at least a year and a half before our colleagues arrived. The expense would be immeasurable but they'd come, of that there was no doubt.

Our application of Neivson's Progression indicated that the Bugs with their compressed developmental timescale would soon be centuries ahead of mankind. We hoped they'd learn to understand the Glyphics, perhaps even defuse them.

A filmy rainbow plane undulated through the air across my path. I stopped quickly before my leading scorch field touched it. Set on its task of mindless pollination, the plane settled over the single unspiked section of a plant to my right. Its bright colours ameliorated the cold blues of the seed heads. I magnified vision enough to see the tiny indentations on its wings where insects had nibbled at it while it fed

from the seedheads. If it was lucky it would live long enough to breed before its gossamer wing was too tattered for flight. Struggle and death. Look closely enough beneath the beauty and they were always there.

Humankind had first discovered the Glyphics in bacteria in the 1980s but hadn't recognized them for what they were. It wasn't until the beginning of the millennium, and the completion of that meticulous mapping and functional cross-correlation which was the Human Genome Project, that the same codon sequences, camouflaged by occasional sections of randomness, were found in man himself.

While the Push was being developed and AIs sent out to explore our nearest stellar neighbours, the biologists continued to puzzle over the Glyphics. Viral tools were perfected for manipulating DNA *in vivo* and when man tentatively began to alter his own makeup, they were applied to the Glyphics.

The effects were inevitably disastrous. A massive wash of enzymes caused almost instant hyper-metabolism, with each cell and organ getting energy from its own breakdown. The rogues were always as destructive as they could be in the brief time allowed them. Even in humans, in the few experiments that had been attempted.

Of course it'd never gone as spectacularly wrong as with the Bugs, but then few ecologies were that fragile. The Bugs had only survived as long as they had because it was ingrained into them not to damage their habitat. Even their wars were fought in carefully demarcated zones.

Gingerly skirting the rainbow plane I trudged on. Looking back, I could follow my smouldering meanders back to the holographic hillock which hid the sleek arrowhead shape of the Lander. A string of projectors to the west camouflaged the five-klick long tracks the landing gear had gouged in the soft ground. We'd come down a thousand klicks from the caldera, relying on a multitude of carefully disguised remotes for our studies. We'd move in closer if we felt the time was right. I looked at the charred crisscrosses Mikey and I had made on our constitutions and laughed. Our paranoia had definitely slipped.

I wandered on and worried some more.

The Glyphics had given man pause for thought and it'd taken years before human *in vivo* bioengineering really caught on. Mikey's skin-patterning was a typical example though I feared that by the time we got back to Earth less superficial changes might have come into vogue. Providing the restructuring viruses could be tailored to keep well away from the Glyphics virtually any changes were possible if supplemented, like Mikey's, by special diets. But any attempts at neural enhancement activated the Glyphics.

Meanwhile our interstellar probes had found life to be common amongst the stars. Water-based life was *de rigeur* and so it was found to be confined to temperate zones around well-behaved single suns. None of it was both sentient and civilized, as our few manned expeditions had shown. Where species had achieved things like space travel and bioengineering they had become extinct, leaving only bone and fossilized skin for our remotes to sample for their DNA.

permission to publish it privately and sell it on the gaming circuit. We're working together now on a full-scale guide, but quite what we're going to do with it, I don't know! It's probably not the sort of thing my publishers over here or in the States would view as a commercial proposition. It's not big enough for that. But on a privately published level it might have some potential."

A lot of Cooper's work is in series. Is that for pragmatic commercial reasons or a need to fully explore her concepts? "It's a bit of both, to be honest. *Indigo* (the series published in the UK by Grafton) was originally conceived as open-ended and I didn't know how many books it might or might not turn into. When I put the idea to my American publisher, which was Tor at that time, my editor there said, 'What we would really like is eight books running parallel to the seven deadly sins, plus one introductory volume.' So it was in that sense fashioned by commercial considerations. But the other stuff, the Time Master series for example, just seemed naturally to extend over a number of volumes. The length of the stories I map out in my head often fall naturally into at least trilogies.

"As a matter of fact *Indigo* hasn't turned out the way it was originally intended. The seven deadly sins got lost somewhere along the way and it's turned into seven stages of an initiation journey. It does still parallel the seven deadly sins, but very vaguely, very thinly. Actually, I hope that everyone who reads it is going to be able to interpret it in their own way.

"*Indigo* grew out of an idea for a totally different series, which never came to anything, about a city that was in some senses alive. It was a city that had a kind of gestalt, a personality of its own. I came up with three or four different stories set there, and *Indigo* was a character in one of those stories. The series fell by the wayside, but the character – and her name, which I liked – stuck in my mind. Her personality started to come out very strongly.

"I think it was the Pandora's box legend that gave me the key to *Indigo's* character. Then I thought some sort of witchcraft-type powers

would be appropriate; giving her the ability to change shape perhaps. That turned out to be a temporary thing and she's moved beyond that now. Then I had the idea of an animal companion, a wolf, with which she can communicate as she would with another human being. That really, really appealed to me.

"Then, as often happens, after a couple of books the ideas and characters started to develop a momentum of their own and went off in their own directions. I followed. This happens a lot with me. The story takes off and I go toddling happily along after it carrying my word processor. Mind you, I can get hopping mad with *Indigo* at times because she's so stubborn. And she never learns."

It can take Cooper anything between three and ten months to finish a novel, occasionally a year. "I don't get what's commonly known as writer's block," she explains, "but I do get stuck on plot sometimes. One of my favourite quotes, and I ought to have it pinned up over my computer, is from Dr Johnson, who said, 'A man can write at any time if he would but set himself to it.'

"But, having said that, sometimes it's really hard. This is something I've never been able to explain or understand, but there are times when I know exactly what I want to say and just *cannot* get the words into the right order. A sentence gets convoluted and rambling and the paragraphs are all wrong. So you have to keep on and on and on until you finally get it right. Every time I start a book I have a clear picture in my head of what it's going to be, then when it's finished it's a case of, 'Good God! I didn't think it would turn out like *that!*' I hope it's better than the original vision, of course, but who's to say?"

She describes herself as "slapdash and haphazard" in the way she works. "One of the few concessions I make to being organized is that I usually have an outline, some kind of synopsis before the book is written, but that always gets changed as I go along. In this respect the greatest discovery I ever made was the word processor, because of all the time it saves in cutting and pasting the alterations,

which is absolutely invaluable. I think I write a lot better as the result of using a word processor. Back in the neolithic age, when we all used typewriters, sometimes you thought, 'Oh no, I'm not going to do *another* draft.'

"I usually revise once. I subscribe to the Middle Eastern adage 'Consider it drunk, then consider it sober. It it's all right both ways, leave it.' So it's usually one draft and one revision with me. I do everything on screen then print out the draft in rough so I can have a look through it on the printed page. That gives you a totally different perspective than the screen. I hand edit, make those changes on the screen, and print it out again.

"I would certainly not want to give the impression that there's any kind of mediumistic aspect involved, but I do think a lot of it does come straight from the subconscious and bypasses the conscious. I often look back and think, 'Cor, did I do that?' And when I'm actually writing, and it's going really well, I can't stop for anything. I could be starving hungry or something but I still can't leave it. That's weird, but it's lovely.

"Another thing is that I'm a very visual writer. I find I can't write a scene until I've seen it running through my mind's eye like a film. This makes me think I'd love to do something like a screenplay. Something else I'd like to try is radio plays. The medium of radio is wonderful as far as I'm concerned."

There are other directions she would like to travel in too. "If I didn't have to worry about making a living I'd probably experiment with other things. There are quite a few things I'd like to write that might not sell but I'd enjoy doing. But the point is that writing is an enormous pleasure for me and I don't think I could ever stop. If I never sold another book again as long as I live and suddenly became the ultimate pariah of the publishing industry I'd still write.

"The horror genre interests me, but not the stalk-and-slash stuff. I like to have my spine tingled but keep my lunch. I believe there's an as yet untapped well of ideas and inspiration out there for genuinely scary books. Supernatural might